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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000928

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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TAGS: PGOV PREL TU

SUBJECT:IFTAR SEASON IN ISTANBUL

REF: ISTANBUL 872

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Classified By: Consul General Sharon Wiener for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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¶1. (C) Summary and comment. Iftar dinners traditionally highlight family, tranquillity and solidarity. While U.S.-Turkey friendship and cooperation were themes at most iftars, guests often noted challenges in the relationship. The Consul General hosted our first Iftar on September 18, in honor of visiting Undersecretary Burns (reftel). In what has become an annual event, the POL/ECON section hosted Justice and Development Party (AKP) local operatives September 25. Media editors and writers, along with a sprinkling of politicians, mingled at a third CG-sponsored Iftar on September 27 while our final Iftar this Ramazan was an October 1 FCS-sponsored event that brought together an environmental technologies trade mission and municipality officials, including the mayor of Istanbul. In formal conversations and other chance meetings throughout Istanbul, Turks continue to be warm and appreciative of an America they prefer to view as a friend. However, on-going opposition to U.S. action in Iraq, particularly our perceived failure to "do more" in combating the PKK in Northern Iraq, combined with growing alarm regarding U.S. intentions toward Iran have contributed to a climate of suspicion that is apparent even among those who count themselves as our "friends". End summary and comment.

Big Business and Members of Parliament

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¶2. (SBU) In a broad-ranging September 18 dinner conversation with two recently-elected AKP members of parliament and four senior business leaders, Undersecretary Burns discussed constitutional reform, prospects for resolving conflict with Armenia, the treatment of minorities in Turkey, Turkish press and public opinion of the United States as well as relations with the EU, Iran and Northern Iraq and the PKK. Viewpoints were fairly diverse, but the group agreed that the new Justice and Development Party (AKP)-controlled government was positioned to move forward on these and other difficult issues. (Please see reftel for a detailed readout.)

Istanbul AK Party Leadership

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¶3. (SBU) Pol/Econ officers hosted AKP local party

functionaries on September 25. Party Youth Branch attendance was high in addition to deputy chairmen and other ranking members who attended. Alican Tasci, Deputy Chairman for political and juridical affairs suddenly turned from lighter conversation to ask, "What about Iran? Turkey won't support you in a war with Iran." The war in Iraq led to deaths of many women and children; Turkey could not give its support for a war effort against a neighbor following such mismanaged efforts in Iraq, according to Tasci. Couldn't the U.S. work harder at diplomacy? We said the U.S. and European allies are employing diplomacy to convince Tehran to give up its nuclear program, but major economic deals such as Turkey's gas agreement undercut efforts to isolate the regime to compel a stop to the nuclear program. Given Turks' centuries of contentious history with Iran, we found it surprising that Turkey apparently did not take a nuclear-armed Iran more seriously. The comment elicited a reflective pause in the conversation.

#### Media and Politics

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¶4. (SBU) At an Iftar held on September 27 for contacts from the media and public intellectuals, the Consul General noted the deep ties between Turkey and the U.S., prompting guests to recount positive experiences visiting the U.S. However, discussion of current events including the PKK, Iraq and Iran, led guests to underscore that U.S. standing in Turkey is so low that urgent steps were necessary to begin to repair the damage. Zaman Foreign News Editor Celil Sagir said that though "informed Turks" still consider Turkey's relationship with the U.S. important, popular disillusionment with U.S. foreign policy is a serious problem that should not be dismissed as short-term. He said most Turks think the USG does not care about the PKK threat to Turkey. Sagir suggested that many believe Washington actively chooses not to act against the PKK in northern Iraq because the USG sees

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Kurdish militant groups as an ally against Iran and a bulwark against Sunni terrorism. He said capture of PKK leaders and their removal to Turkey would lead to a drastic improvement in the Turkish public's views of the U.S. We pointed out the extreme difficulty involved but guests thought that, given the will, the USG could easily capture PKK leaders.

¶5. (SBU) "Yeni Safak" editor Metin Mutanoglu added that many Turks are paying close attention to the anticipated referendum on Kirkuk province's status, viewing it as another test-case for U.S.-Turkey relations. He cautioned that if the USG "allows" Kirkuk's incorporation into semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan, Kirkuk's minority Turkmen population would be at risk, which would likely force Turkish military intervention to protect them. And guests urged the U.S. to pursue diplomacy with Iran, warning that military action to stop the nuclear program would likely provoke Iran into attacking U.S. interests in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, sowing instability in Iraq and the Gulf. Journalists were surprised to learn of the extensive list of incentives that the P5 1 had offered Iran in 2006 (e.g., peaceful nuclear energy cooperation, WTO membership, hydrocarbon partnership with Europe, etc.) in exchange for a suspension of its enrichment program. Sagir suggested that the U.S. and the rest of the P5 1 are not doing enough to highlight the economic benefits that have been offered to, and rejected by, Iran.

#### Municipality and Visiting Trade Mission

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¶6. (SBU) The Foreign Commercial Service sponsored our last official Iftar of this season hosted by the CG on October 1. Istanbul's Mayor, Kadir Topbas, attended the event that brought together municipal officials and an environmental technologies trade mission. Water issues dominated the conversations anticipating Istanbul's hosting of the World

Water Forum in 2009 and reflecting immediate concern for the drought in Turkey over the summer. Istanbul was spared greater impact from the drought due to wise investment in dams and water systems years ago as city population increased. Mayor Topbas made a point of telling the Consul General that the Prime Minister had passed the word to AKP activists and politicians to do their best to improve relations with the USG in a visible way. Topbas' statement of this instruction cast light on why a couple of our contacts seemed to trip over each other in helping to arrange the consulate's iftar for AKP functionaries on September 25.

WIENER